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Defectors Both Come and Go

The defection in Geneva of a member of Russia's top-secret espionage and security service has been spoken of in some quarters as a major intelligence coup for the West, as it might well turn out to be.

For the moment, however, it would be wise to avoid reading too much into this event. In the continuing secret war of espionage, caution is always a good policy.

If Yuri Nossenko of the Soviet KGB —the Committee for State Security— did indeed bring with him to the West important information on nuclear policy and disarmament, the Russians probably would have reacted strongly by now.

This would be especially true if Nossenko knows whether the Soviets are really working towards new disarmament agreements, or whether they are simply dragging out the talks for propaganda reasons.

So far the Soviets have not given any indications that the rug has been pulled from under them. The Nossenko defection, which obviously involved Western complicity, could have been used as a basis for chucking the talks. This hasn't happened. The question is raised about how much nuclear policy information Nossenko was indeed party to.

Nossenko, who is 36, could not have held too high a position in the KGB; he undoubtedly will be able to tell U.S. intelligence some things of interest, but it is doubtful that he can supply information comparable to that given by Oleg Penkovsky, the Red Army colonel executed by the Russians last year on charges (privately confirmed in Washington) that he spied for Western intelligence.

Nossenko, in short, may turn out to be rather a small fish, despite the publicity now surrounding his case. It seems improbable, for the moment at any rate, that he is as important an information source as Penkovsky, or the Bulgarian diplomat Ivan-Asen Georgiev (also executed) or Vladimir Petrov, the KGB agent who defected in Australia in 1954.

Nor, to keep the record straight, does Nossenko appear to be in the same league as the British diplomats Burgess and MacLean, the physicists Fuchs and Pontecorvo, or the American cryptographers Martin and Mitchell, all of whom went over to the Russians.

Cold war defections work both ways. Sometimes they may mean a temporary gain for one side or the other, but none is decisive in itself.

When all the cheering is over the cold war goes on as intensely as ever.